

# The meaning and significance of 'water' in the Antwerp cityscapes (c. 1550-1650 AD)

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Scholars have often described the sixteenth century as the 'golden age' of Antwerp. From the last decades of the fifteenth century onwards, Antwerp became one of the leading cities in Europe in terms of wealth and cultural activity, comparable to Florence, Rome and Venice. The rising importance of the Antwerp harbour made the city a major centre of trade. Foreign tradesmen played an essential role in the rise of Antwerp as metropolis (Van der Stock, 1993: 16). This period of great prosperity, however, came to a sudden end with the commencement of the political and economic turmoil caused by the Eighty Years' War (1568 – 1648). In 1585, the Fall of Antwerp even led to the so-called 'blocking' of the Scheldt, the most important route from Antwerp to the sea (Groenveld, 2008: 32–34; Van der Stock, 1993: 16–17). This blockade, forced upon Antwerp by the Beggars (Dutch: *Watergeuzen*), was not a physical barrier between Antwerp and the sea, but it was a barricade in the form of taxes. Nevertheless, it became expensive and thus difficult to sail from the sea to the Antwerp harbour. Since the Scheldt was the main stimulus of Antwerp's trade, this event ended the economical blossoming of the city by the end of the sixteenth century. Although the harbour kept some of its importance during the following century, the city lost its privileged position to Amsterdam in the northern part of the Low Countries.

It is generally believed that the city, once open to the world, gradually closed in upon itself after the Fall in 1585. In this view, Antwerp became excluded from the outside world during this 'dark period', both economically and culturally. Focussing on the meaning and significance of maritime landscape in the cityscapes of Antwerp, in which the Scheldt plays an important role, this essay will examine to what extent this conventional view on the rise and fall of Antwerp corresponds to the visually rendered perceptions of the city. Can this presumed period of decline also be noticed in the portrayal of the city, or does this maritime approach shed different light on the matter? This essay has been inspired by the internationalization project 'Trading Values: Cultural Translation in Early Modern Antwerp'. This NWO-funded project started in 2011. It was initiated by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Groningen and supported by the Courtauld Institute of Art (University of London) and the Institute of Art History (University of Bern).

This essay starts with a short history of the rise of cityscapes in the fine arts. It will show the emergence of maritime landscape as an independent motif in the sixteenth century. Set against this theoretical framework, a selection of Antwerp cityscapes will be discussed. Both prints and paintings will be analysed according to viewpoint, the ratio of water, sky and city elements in the picture plane, type of ships and other significant maritime details. The primary aim is to see if and how the cityscape of Antwerp changed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, in particular between 1550 and 1650. The case studies represent Antwerp cityscapes from different periods within this time frame, in order to examine whether a certain development can be determined. Since it is impossible within the scope of this essay to identify all different ship-types, this study will only limit itself to simple remarks about the size of the ships, number of masts or sails and the amount of ships sailing on the Scheldt or in the Antwerp harbour. It should be noted that the period in question shows a lot of artistic activity and diversity. In relation to the subject of this essay, it is a rather complex story. For that matter, this aspect will not be discussed in the present study.

## The rise of cityscapes in the art of the Low Countries

Cityscapes are difficult to define in terms of genre. Strictly speaking, a 'cityscape' is a representation of or a view on a particular city. Authors are divided about the genesis of the cityscape (Stapel, 2000: 9). According to some, representations of the city originated in landscape painting. In this approach, city views should be interpreted as artistic renderings of urban motives. Topographical accuracy was of secondary interest to the makers of these representations (Lakerveld, 1977: 18). Others, however, have associated cityscapes with the rise of the portrait-genre, since the city obtained the same status as the individual in artistic sense (Van der Stock, 1993: p. 69). Also it has been suggested that developments in cartography and topographical prints gave rise to the emergence of the genre (Stapel, 2000: 9).

Regardless of the origin in painting, the rise of cityscapes is closely linked to the emergence of maritime landscape. In the fifteenth century, a new-found enthusiasm for optical realism initiated the incorporation of maritime elements in traditional religious paintings



Fig. 1 Jan Massys, Detail of *Flora*, 1559, oil on panel, 113.2 x 112.9 cm, Kunsthalle, Hamburg (Copyright Kunsthalle, Hamburg).

(Russell, 1983: 3). In doing so, North European painters preceded their Italian Renaissance colleagues, who were generally known for their 'realistic' renderings of nature. It is assumed that the Flemish painter Joachim Patinir (ca. 1480–1524) was the originator of the pure landscape and river-scape (Preston, 1937: 2). In his compositions, Patinir reduced the size of figures so much in proportion to the landscape that they were little more than a bright colour contrast. This is especially clear in his paintings on the theme of St. Jerome. It is significant that although landscape is featured more prominently within these paintings, the traditional religious themes still remained prevalent during this period.

Another significant painter was Pieter Breughel the Elder (ca. 1525–1569). It is said that he influenced true maritime painting with his open seascapes, such as *The fall of Icarus* (ca. 1558) (Preston, 1937: 2). Since the late Middle Ages the motive of water thus entered into the representation of landscape. Yet maritime painting can certainly not be considered as an autonomous genre before the end of the sixteenth century (Prud'homme van Reine, 2009: 30).

Once water became a subject in the representation of landscape in painting, the first cityscapes also began to appear (Koeman, 1985: 113). In print the independent cityscape or 'city profile' already started to evolve during the last decades of the fifteenth century. These cityscapes were closely related to cartography and topography, for in the sixteenth century, map making and landscape painting were often done by the same artists. The main problem they had to deal with were the choices of what and how to represent landscapes on a plane surface. Accordingly, the Renaissance maps were often used as decorative art. Therefore these maps can both be considered as works of art and as scientific products (Unger, 2010: 2). By contrast, in painting, the cityscape only started to develop as an autonomous genre during the seventeenth century (Lakerveld, 1977: 18). Until then the view on the city was always part of a larger landscape. The case studies dealt with in this essay are in compliance with the development of cityscapes within these genres.

## The iconography of Antwerp

One of the earliest traceable cityscapes of Antwerp is in a topographical map of the Scheldt, made in 1468 (Van der Stock, 1993: 151). This map (measuring 351 by 521cm) was commissioned by the Great Council of the Netherlands in Mechelen in order to chart the many places at which toll had to be paid. There is a clear emphasis on waterways. The map shows the course of the Scheldt from Rupelmonde to the sea. The Scheldt gave passage far inland. Even sea ships were able to sail upstream, as can be seen on the map. This was one of the reasons for the blossoming of Antwerp in the first half of the sixteenth century. Different ships prominently feature on the map. The size of the ships, however, does not correspond to the different cities depicted on the map. Since the map was used to chart the toll processes, it is not surprising that the ships are prominently depicted. Focussing on the cityscape of Antwerp, it is rendered in great detail. Because of its low bird's-eye perspective, only a few specific buildings can be identified. The viewer gets the impression of an abstracted façade, with only the tower of the Cathedral of Our Lady rising above it. The Scheldt clearly dominates, whereas the cityscape is pushed backwards on the map. It is not yet a panoramic view, but it may be considered as a predecessor of the monumental view on Antwerp on the roadstead or harbour of the city. This specific image on Antwerp originates in the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century and is predominant in the representations of the city during the whole sixteenth century.

While in print and maps the cityscape emerged as a genre, in painting it was still used as a background. A good example is the painting of *Flora* (1559) by Jan Massys, with a view on Antwerp (fig.1). An elegant woman is painted in the foreground dominating the painting. She is the representation of Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers. The red and white flowers she holds allude to the colours of the city. Typical for paintings in this time, the cityscape of Antwerp is portrayed in the background. Nevertheless, looking at the overall painting, the cityscape is prominently featuring, for the view on Antwerp is framed by the





Fig. 2 George Braun and Frans Hogenberg. *Bird's-eye view of Antwerp from the Civitates orbis terrarum (I)*, printed in Cologne, 1572. (Copyright The National Library of Israel, Shapell Family Digitization Project and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Geography-Historic Cities Research Project).

green of the landscape elements. Since the scape itself is lighter than its surroundings and the sky breaks up behind the city, the city stands out. Also the posture of Flora's arm, with the flowers in her hand, directs the spectator to the cityscape in the background. Different iconographic elements of Antwerp can be traced, for example the tower of the cathedral and the abbey of St. Michael (Van der Stock, 1993: 73).

In this iconography of Antwerp, the Scheldt plays an essential role. This may be inferred from the width of the Scheldt, which is comparable to the width of the city in the picture. A closer examination shows that the river is filled with ships, ranging from seagoing ships to smaller vessels. Yet the painting does not suggest an abundance of activity on the river. On the left three or four ships are sailing towards the harbour. This is only a small part of the cityscape, which is hardly visible because the boats almost disappear behind a tree. The harbour is filled with mooring ships. Another four or five boats are sailing along the cityscape. The picture of Massys may be an allegory of the prosperity of Antwerp. It shows the city at its economic and artistic peak, just before the political and religious turmoil of the next decades. The focus on the Scheldt is important for the expression of this specific image of Antwerp.

City portraits remained largely a matter of print makers and publishers until the beginning of the seventeenth century (Van Suchtelen & Wheelock, 2008: 36). In 1572, Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg were breaking new ground with their bird's-eye view of Antwerp in their *Civitates orbis terrarum*. Nowadays this decorative map is considered as an iconic view on Antwerp, but in fact it was rather unconventional at the time of production. Braun and Hogenberg actually depicted the city twice. Firstly, they used the conventional orientation with the Scheldt at the top, but secondly they rotated this configuration to create a new perspective (fig. 2) (Pollak, 2010: 20). This second view on Antwerp shows the city in its full glory. The citadel, which was built between 1567 and 1571, is emphasized (Groenvelde, 2008: 33), and the Scheldt plays an equally important role in this view. It occupies one-fourth of the picture plane and it is seen from a bird's-eye perspective from the south side of the city. The second approach creates a more detailed image, compared to the previously discussed map. Waves of the water can be distinguished, which makes it a more lively representation. The grandeur of water is also underscored by the canals surrounding Antwerp. Consequently, the river's dominance is visually emphasized. The map shows industrious port activities, which is an indication for the



economic wealth of the city (Van der Stock, 1993: 72). The image could be seen as the self-representation or promotion of Antwerp as a major city of trade. Here the individual ships are actually identifiable. There is a wide variety of different types, from small boats to sea ships. Two one-mast ships and two two-mast ships sail from land inward towards the harbour. The two bigger ships do not have their sails unrolled. The ships coming from sea have white bulging sails. Most of these ships also sail towards the harbour. A large sea ship with bulging sails and surrounding clouds of dust attracts the viewer's attention. Perhaps this is a warship, the dust referring to the presence of cannons on board. The map has a decorative character. It was printed in a series of other cityscapes. The identity of the city is largely determined by the activity on the Scheldt. It presents Antwerp as a flourishing, universal metropolis.

### New times, new views?

Antwerp lost much of its significance as a cultural capital after the 1585 siege. Caused by the political circumstances, Antwerp's cartography school collapsed and many skilled Protestants fled to Amsterdam. There the exiles stimulated the rise of Amsterdam as a cultural capital (Pollak, 2010: 19). The political events of 1585 left a

deep impression on Antwerp. This is reflected in a painting by Hans Vredeman de Vries, made only one year after the Fall of the city (fig. 3). The setting is curious. In the foreground the arrival of Alexander Farnese is celebrated with a variety of activities, whereas in the background a lot of activity on the Scheldt is shown. Numerous ships of different types sail towards the harbour. On the quay of the river merchants meet and bring their merchandise. These activities allude to the prosperous times, when the city's harbour flourished and wealth was derived from it. The picture gives an abstract vision of the meandering river. As a result of the view from the east, the city is visually directly connected to the sea. It emphasizes Antwerp's relation with the sea and thus presents the city as open to the world. In this image ships not only sail to the harbour from land inwards, also on the route between Antwerp and the sea a large number of ships are featured. Interestingly, in reality the Scheldt was still blocked in 1586 by the Beggars. Therefore it seems unlikely that there was so much activity going on. So why does the painter give this idealised impression of the river? The answer is that an allegory on the revival of Antwerp after the victory of Alexander Farnese in 1585 is represented. For the Catholic inhabitants of Antwerp the Spanish victory meant hope for the revival of Antwerp to its former glory.



Fig. 3 Hans Vredeman de Vries, *Allegory on the revival of Antwerp after the victory of Alexander Farnese in 1585*, 1586, oil on canvas, 155 x 216 cm, Stadsarchief, Antwerp. (Copyright MAS, Antwerp – photo: Bart Huysmans).





Fig. 4 Abel Grimmer and Hendrik van Balen, *View on the harbour of Antwerp*, 1600, oil on panel, 37.7 x 44.4 cm, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp (Copyright Lukas - Art in Flanders VZW – photo: Hugo Maertens).

Almost fifteen years later, in 1600, Abel Grimmer and Hendrik van Balen painted another interesting cityscape of Antwerp (fig. 4). Like the first case study, this picture shows the harbour of Antwerp from a conventional point of view. Artists often depicted Antwerp from the opposite side of the river Scheldt, the so-called 'Vlaamse Hoofd', thus combining a view from the waterfront with the inland landscape. The cityscape, including this left bank and the Scheldt, takes in one-third of the painting. The viewer looks down on the city and the river. The characteristic iconographic features of the cityscape are rendered. Furthermore God, the Holy Spirit, Christ and Mary are floating on a cloud. They are flanked by flying angels and take up almost two third of the picture. The divine characters painted above the city were rather unconventional. Usually Antwerp was represented with figures like Mercury (Roman god of trade), Vertumnus (Roman god of the seasons) and Fama (Roman goddess of rumour, slander and gossip) (Van der Stock, 1993: 285). In this picture the presence of Christian figures may be interpreted as an expression of the Catholic Church regaining

power in Antwerp. The Scheldt represented suggests that Antwerp still enjoys prosperous times. The river is even more prominent than the city itself. The size of the ships, however, differs from the previous case studies. A lot of small ships having only one mast sail on the river. Some ships don't have a mast at all. On the right side of the picture, which is the route from land inwards, only one 'big' ship is shown. Bigger ships are depicted on the left side. Here, three two-mast ships sail towards the harbour, only one with bulging sails. Another ship displays a total of four masts. Apart from some ships mooring, however, there is little activity in the harbour itself. The city is still represented as prosperous, and the Scheldt still plays an essential part in creating Antwerp's identity as thus. Since the Scheldt was still blocked by the Beggars, it seems likely to suggest that fewer sea-ships were able to sail towards the Antwerp harbour. In this sense Grimmer and Van Balen's image presents us with a more realistic view of the situation, since smaller ships are shown on the Scheldt.

With the beginning of the seventeenth century and under the influence of the emerging maritime painting



in Holland, the cityscapes of Antwerp again underwent a drastic change in appearance. By then painting was favoured at the expense of prints and maps, for paintings were considered to be more prestigious by patrons (Van der Stock, 1998: 76). Up until then it was more or less conventional in all mediums to present the city from a bird's-eye view. During the seventeenth century, however, the pictures acquire a more naturalistic and atmospheric approach (Preston, 1937: 38). The Antwerp cityscapes of painters like Bonaventura Peeters (1614 – 1652), Jan Wildens (1585/6 – 1653) and Jean Baptist (1618 – 1676) present a more personal and realistic view. This can also be seen in the cityscape of Antwerp of the Dutch Jan van Goyen (fig. 5). The viewer is on the same level as the presented picture and therefore the viewer is addressed on a more personal basis. The important buildings are still visible, but are not emphasized any more. Only the silhouette of the city as a whole is presented. The sky dominates the image and overshadows the river. The low perspective provides a cramped image of the river, rather than an open and spacious one. The emphasis on Antwerp as universal metropolis is left behind. Furthermore the tonality gives the city a gloomy look. Only a few small ships sail across the harbour. On the foreground people are hauling fish-nets. The image shows aspects of a locally bound economy rather than a flourishing global capital. Comparing it to the previous case studies, it is clear that the nature of activity stimulated by the Scheldt has changed.

## Conclusions and discussion

The Early Modern period (c. 1500 – 1800 AD) marked successful but also precarious times for the city of Antwerp. Focussing on the Scheldt and its activity, it can be argued that the view of Antwerp represented by artists in the cityscapes did not always reflect the historical situation. At the same time, the importance of the Scheldt for the blossoming of the city is reflected in the cityscapes of the time. City portraits remained largely a matter of print makers and publishers until the beginning of the seventeenth century. Typically Antwerp was portrayed from the south-side of the city, where the river prominently featured in the picture plane. Large ships sail towards the city and the harbours are filled. Antwerp is presented as a universal metropolis, vibrant and above all prosperous.

Due to the blockade of the river after 1585, fewer ships could sail from the sea towards the city. However, the number of ships only decreases in the representations of Antwerp in the course of the seventeenth century, whereas the types of ships represented change into smaller examples. Hence, this paper proposes that, although the harbour became less significant in international trade, the city kept trying to present itself as open to the outside world far into the seventeenth century. The rise of the cityscape as a genre presented the perfect model for the self-representation of the city. It enabled Antwerp to suggest continuity in politically and economically turbulent times. The iconographic



Fig. 5 Jan van Goyen, *Grand view on Antwerp*, 1648, oil on panel, 74.5 x 118.5 cm, private collection. (Picture from the catalogue: Wurfbain M.L., 1981, *Jan van Goyen, 1596–1656: conquest of space: paintings from museums and private collections*, Amsterdam, Watermann; Bremen, Schunemann, p. 121).

features of Antwerp suggest the representation of the Scheldt to be essential for the identity of the city. It symbolizes Antwerp in its best shape and therefore reminded of the prosperous times of the city. In this sense, these cityscapes are not only portraits of the city, they are also an expression of Antwerp's continued claim of being a centre of trade and prosperity, even after the Fall in 1585.

Only half a century later, around the mid-seventeenth century, the view on Antwerp started to change under the influence of Dutch maritime painting. Jan van Goyen's *View on Antwerp* for example, approaches the city in a more rustic manner. It does not show the economic vigour on the Scheldt as presented in all the previous case studies. However, this essay does not propose that the image Van Goyen presents is directly related to his aim to represent a more realistic image of the river and Antwerp. There may be more causes for his perception and representation.

All in all, this paper shows that a maritime approach does shed different light on the traditional story of the rise and fall of Antwerp. Although the harbour became less significant in the international trade after the Fall of Antwerp in 1585, images of the city kept trying to present it as open to the outside world far into the seventeenth century. To gain more insight in the meanings of the Antwerp cityscapes, the Antwerp case studies need to be compared with cityscapes of other cities. Furthermore, artistic activity and changes in style should be taken into account in order to give a clearer vision on the development of the imagery of Antwerp during this period. In addition, more research on patrons and commissioners might give new insights into the purpose and significance of the cityscapes.

## Notes

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